

CREATIVE AUTHORS AND THEIR MESSAGES: A COLLECTION OF CRITICISMS

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Abstract

Oppression is evident in every society from the beginning of time. First in England and then America, the defilement of people based on race, gender, and birthplace found its way from the streets of the country to the pages of many works of literature. These core issues in the plot of narrative gave rise to literary criticism. The fragile psyche of immigrants is outlined in Charles Brockden Browns *Edgar Huntly*, the defilement of women is greatly shown through the writing of Edna's search for identity in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, and the lingering effects of slavery are recorded in the pages of Richard Wrights *Native Son*, among other intermixed issues in various British works. For the books discussed, psychological criticism, New Historicism, ethnic study, Marxism, and a few other types of criticism are touched on.

Preface

Being a mulatto woman with many addresses as a child, I can relate to each of the characters I wrote about who feel oppressed, confused, and angered by their given place in society. This world is brutal, and the future seems to be bleak, but books offer the chance to learn of the hardships that were once overcome by bi-racial and minority groups of women before me. I wrote this paper on oppression because I will not be pushed into the background. I will read as many books as it takes and write as much criticism as needed to convey a message of willingness to understand and conviction to be heard.

CHAPTER 1

THE INTRODUCTION OF BURIED MOTIVATIONS

Oppression holds a place in every society of the world. Rooted in history, literature and art hold first-hand experiences and thoughts as well as consequences of the defilement of groups of people. Women, African-Americans, and immigrants among many others undergo suppression in America every day. Even though the amount of legally bindings documents and rules that bind someone to inferiority is becoming the lesser of laws, the remainder of them alongside the long trail of evidence supporting them in the past is still there. Being so, many works written in past centuries offer insights into the origins of oppression. Sadly, it seems that much of the wrongdoings seem to come from Caucasian men, be it the denial of female actors in the great theatres of Europe or Greece, or the enslavement of entire races in Egypt or America. The misconstrued understanding of entitlement on their part is the cause of many great evils but also became the power behind many great authors and poets. Like all good writers, pieces of themselves are evident in their works, like their motives and opinions. Through constructive readings of novels, readers and critics are able to dig these out. Types of criticism include psychological, feminist, "New Historical", Marxist, and many more. By taking a work and deconstructing it using one of those methods, analysts find multiple layers of understanding of, rebellion against, and even conformity and agreement with the oppressors. That being said, select English works offer the background for many post-colonial works in the American nation in which issues of legal and social oppression is evident.

CHAPTER 2

THE SUPPRESSION OF WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL LITERATURE

Patriarchal societies have deformed the image of women since the beginning of documented literature. In ancient times, men like Euripides wrote of women like Medusa: a beautiful young priestess who is seduced by Poseidon and in return becomes shunned by Athena and turned into a Gorgon with scales for skin and a head full of snakes (Biscontini 1). From there, feminine roles thousands of years later in medieval literature are much like their roles in the misogynistic medieval societies, of which was greatly influenced by the recordings and beliefs of men before them on a women's disparate nature. That is, for centuries and across the globe, women and their abilities have been belittled and marginalized by men and the way they write women. Women are juxtaposed with their male counterparts and are frequently written as greedy, insane, lustful, devious, monstrous, and overall incapable of being an equal to their masculine superiors in literary writings as well as in life surrounding the centuries referred to as the middle and medieval ages.

Literature is littered with male poets, playwrights, and philosophers in conjunction with their misogynist views of women, with many "medieval fabliaux present[ing] women as shrewish, deceptive, and unfaithful (Pearman 19)". The stories of Guinevere are examples of how men corrupt the character of a woman, both directly and indirectly.

With the case of Guinevere in Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*, she is



Fig 1

depicted as both deceitful and disloyal. Malory writes her as shallow and immoral, of which is solidified when he writes the queen to say she would rather be taken and slain might her fellow adulterer be able to escape (Malory 482). Furthermore, the author details the male chauvinist Sir Gawain supporting his fellow knight's decision to lay with his king's wife; his excuses are that Sir Lancelot saved the royal couple from death many times and that the man was usually braver than the rest. Knowing this, per a male-dominated world, men who are brave do not deserve to be reproached because they are, in fact, only "misfortuned" by a lustful married woman and her debaucheries (Malory 482).

If the above [statement] seems redundant, it is because the topic of misogyny, like the mace or chastity belt, participates in a vestigial horror practically synonymous with the term medieval, and because one of the assumptions governing our perception of the Middle Ages is the viral presence of antifeminism. The ritual denunciation of women constitutes something on the order of a cultural constant, reaching back to the Old Testament as well as to Ancient Greece and extending through the fifteenth century (Bloch 1).

That being said, even recognized women seem to have no place in the writings between the fifth and fifteenth centuries. For example, the names Aristotle, Plato, and Galen are sprinkled in many medieval creative works but there are few, if any, mentions of ancient feminine creative minds; as an illustration, there are no easily found middle age works that allude to Erinna, a celebrated Greek poet or any praises for Aspasia, a Greek poet that is now denounced to a prostitute (Plant 41). Moving forward, women in early medieval literature were subjected to the overbearing presence of men. The author of *Beowulf* uses women in the epic as tools that build upon the domineering, prideful brutes that consume the pages.

The ladies of *Beowulf* are mentioned scarcely by name and never given more than a supporting role within the journey of her male co-characters. The queen Wealhtheow is not given more than the part of hostess, only being acknowledged when speaking of a man or waiting on one. She is, therefore, used by the author to praise his mighty men and show the worth of them to his audience, while also showing the worthlessness of her by painting her as a server. Also, there are women that the author writes as being used to calm tensions between rivaling tribes through arranged marriages and even telling's of women being reduced to bed-warmers (*Beowulf* 85). Women are disregarded so much so in medieval times that the warriors within the *Beowulf* poem only speak of themselves as their father's children. That is because, before modern medicine and a clear understanding of the reproductive system, men were the seed bearers and women but the disfigured dirt that nourished it. After all, physicians like Galen and Aristotle deemed the woman to be "an undercooked male (Pearman 8)".

As a good amount of academic scholarship in the field of medieval studies has shown, the Middle Ages was a time in which the body was an important site of spiritual, scientific, philosophical, and epistemological questioning...the social production of gender and disability in the literature of the high and late medieval periods argues that the conflation of the female body, femininity, and disability that arises in the authoritative discourses of the Middle Ages- such as biblical, patristic, and medieval writings- often succeed in frustrating teleological narrative drives of literary works read in England that feature disabled female characters. (Blamires)

One of the disabled women in the literature is Grendel's mother. Her description typifies the male's domineering power over women and their projected image in literature. She is written as a "monstrous hell-bride" (*Beowulf* 1259) with savage talons and a "tarn-hag [with]...terrible strength (*Beowulf* 1519)". While she is written as an odious monster, the author also makes her a coward, as if it was not enough to be hideous and heartbroken. With this, the attached interpretation of women in society at that time is that they were monsters if they were not married women; their children were spawns of Cain if they were bastards. This conclusion ultimately abides the long history of misogynist writings of the fairer sex (Greenblatt et 282). A few centuries after the *Beowulf* poet, the act of recording women as disabled is reiterated in Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Prologue". The Wife of Bath is written as being disabled due to deafness; however, scholars "[argue] that it is the sexuality that serves as the text's narrative-producing deviance and her punishment that demonstrates the narrative's desire to curb it (Pearman 16)." This means that Chaucer wrote of a sexual woman with the intention of portraying her as disabled due to her lustfulness, being that she was married five times, as opposed to her deafness. More importantly, both "disabilities" came at the hand of a man and this fact links the literature to medieval culture; Chaucer penned her that way because disobedient women in medieval societies were in fact punished with physical impairments, usually at the hands of their husbands, as the Wife of Bath in Chaucer's story (Blamires 19). He sexualizes women through the voice of one, lowering their value even more by making a woman an antifeminist and calling it "experience". "In creating the Wife of Bath, Chaucer drew upon a centuries-old tradition of misogynist writing that was particularly nurtured by the medieval church (Greenblatt et 282)". With writings such as these, conclusions about the welfare and position of women in early medieval society can be made. If using the literature as an

epistemology, the women had no status or stance in life if it were not being requested or granted by a patriarch. That is supported with the women in *Beowulf* being monstrous without their male counterparts and again in Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath" since the Wife of Bath only becomes an essentially independent woman because of the wealth she amassed from marrying multiple men.

However, while most studied medieval works are written by men, there are works written by women during the medieval period that are studied as well like Marie de France's *Lanval* and Margery Kempe's autobiography. Medieval literature almost completely ignores the capability of women in the simultaneous social scene. That is, the literature does not mention the social stigmas women were subjected to during the middle ages. For example, Marie de France writes of women in her story *Lanval*. While de France is a woman herself, she falls prey to the standard condemnations of women. She writes Queen Guinevere as lustful and devious even before Malory does in *Morte Darthur*, furthering the negative connotations women have been subjected to by medieval literary authors. Although de France writes a woman saving her masculine lover, she is still only using the woman as support for her more important male characters, thus feeding the misogynist margins women were speciously required to be written in. Comparatively, an example of an able woman in medieval society being belittled is Eleanor of Aquitaine, who is written as being a "queen and cougar". She was a powerful woman during her years as a French and then English queen, taking stands against the Pope and tagging along on crusades and pilgrimages (Morrison 7). She even rules for eight years after the death of her second husband; however, her accomplishments are watered down by masculine writers. "The early thirteenth-century writer Helinand de Froidmont wrote she 'behaved not like a queen but more like a [whore]'. And Matthew Paris in the mid-thirteenth century suggeste[s] that Eleanor [was] 'engendered by the devil'. These examples [are] fictions dreamed up in a world determined to

break the spirit of a strong-willed woman (Morrison 7).” To push Elanor’s story into a literary state, the author of *Beowulf* emits man’s perpetual ignorance toward the characteristics of strong women when he depreciates Queen Mistruth’s independence. The author uses a male warrior to tell of the “terrible wrongs” done by Queen Modthryth that were only remedied by a man that made her “less of a bane to peoples lives, less cruel-minded, after she was married (Beowulf 1946-1947)” to him, meaning that she changed not of her own free will, but because she married a man that remolded her outlook. This demeaning of a woman’s capacity to be strong without a man and not be problematic at the same time is typified in medieval literary works, so much so that even the few women who could tell their stories wrote themselves within the antifeminist constraints of a society erected for men.

Margery Kempe’s autobiography, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, is read in many different ways, and more often than not, she is perceived as mentally unstable and even delusional because she writes herself that way by placing her words against her male contemporaries expectations. However, that is because many readers do not understand the life she was condemned to living in a male-dominated time. There is no far stretch to be made to assess the mental illnesses that drove her narrative. In Kempe’s book, she outlines her life as a confused woman and Ruth Evans argues that in order to understand her position in medieval literature, one must compare her to a woman in medieval society, which is what Kempe gives scholars a chance to do.

In real life...such triumphant adaptation to the reality principle can scarcely have been the rule. Medieval society took its toll, whether in murder, infanticide, suicide, insanity or daily misery, as surely as modern society continues to do.

Margery Kempe, as much as Alice of Bath, is of the bourgeoisie, but Margery’s

internalization of her class ethos brings no profit and large loss...In order to understand the differences between the fictional and the real versions of sexual economics, we will need to know something about Margery Kempe's specific environment and also about the general development of capitalism in the fifteenth century. (Morrison)

Outside of her narrative, women were no longer considered themselves once married because of a medieval law called coverture, in which the wife experienced a "civil death" (Kennedy 3). Being that, Kempe's choice to embrace a spiritual life was not taken well within the accompanying social scene, partially because she was a married woman and did not really have the right to do so and partially because she was a prominent mayor's daughter, which ultimately saved her from being charged with heresy for pursuing such a life (Greenblatt et 425). Also, in her narrative, she describes a desire to live the life Chaucer wrote for the Wife of Bath but is unable to obtain that amount of disconnectedness.

Not five husbands but only one; not happily childless but perennially pregnant (she had fourteen offspring); not flinging herself into a life of venerean hedonism, but guilt-ridden and full of ambivalence about sex, fascinated by and loathing it at once; not rejoicing in the permissive behests of a kindly god, but sacrificing herself to the continual remonstrances of a strict, authoritarian Jesus, with visions, crying fits and trances. (Morrison)

Taking in all of this, the experience Chaucer describes a woman getting from life in his time by pursuing her own wants is far from the actual outcome. Since that is the case, women of the medieval period are utterly and wrongly ignored by their society through their representations in literature and, thus, underrepresented even by literature written by women themselves.

All in all, women are harshly dictated by men in the demeaning literary recordings of the Middle Ages. Women of medieval stories are subjected to being drowned out and lost within the misogynistic patriarchy that wrote them alongside the feminine voices that came before that have not place beside their masculine contemporaries within the molds of the literature. Being written as lustful, devious, evil, unstable, and invisible, the fairer sex's role in medieval times is that they were meant to disappear into the background and to be used as support for men in the studied works of medieval literature as well as their synchronized social scene. There are no strong women in *Beowulf*; there are no durable feminine voices in the stories of Guinevere. Chaucer tries and fails to write a redeveloped woman in a man's world but only plays further into the misogynist recordings of women, and Margery Kempe is the only example scholars to have of a woman's outlook in life and even it painfully compartmentalizes feminine voices beneath the heavy footmen set out with upon the mind of a woman. With all of the denouncements of an entire gender across centuries, it is no wonder the boiling pot is now bubbling over. It is no wonder women demand a voice.

CHAPTER 3

AN UNCONSCIOUS NATION: THE BROKEN MIND OF IMMIGRANTS IN *EDGAR**HUNTLY*

“There is no standard by which time can be measured, but the succession of our thoughts, and the changes that take place in the external world (Brown 155)”. In the eighteenth century, a nation was born with pretenses of freedom composed of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. However, these inalienable rights were not extended to everyone. In fact, they were created for a specific people: affluent European-American men. Although many published authors in eighteenth century America belonged to that category, some chose to address the falsehoods broadcast through the fictitious American exceptionalism. One of those authors was Charles Brockden Brown. In his novel on sleepwalking, Brown tells the story of Edgar Huntly. He opens his novel with the explanation of his purpose, saying that it is to portray the “condition of [the] country” by connecting it to somnambulism, a “common and most wonderful disease...”, suffered by his characters (Brown 3). He follows his address to the public with a series of letters from Edgar Huntly to his fiancé, Mary Waldergrave. The letters begin with the search to find the murderer of his friend, Waldergrave. Within the letters, the depicted journey leads Huntly, and readers alike, down numerous paths of murder, prejudice, violence, and ignorance that connect the fragmented psyches of himself and Clithero Edny to the American wilderness, social structure, and its roots. That being said, in *Edgar Huntly; or Memoirs of a Sleepwalker*, Charles Brockden Brown writes of the American and his home through a dissociation in the human psyche to form a comparison between the fragmented mental state of European-American men and the broken state of an infantile country.

The mental states of the characters, specifically those of Edgar Huntly and Clithero Edny, suggest to the reader that consciousness and understanding are partial to wakefulness, which is limited to both characters due to their bouts of sleepwalking. “During an episode of parasomnia, individuals are neither awake nor aware, but their actions appear conscious (Popat, Winslade 2).” Sleepwalking is also viewed as a state of dissociation in which the separation between consciousness and unconsciousness is faulty when someone is sleeping. In Brown’s novel, Clithero Edny is the character with the most fragmented mental state because he is the farthest removed from his repressed “memories and emotions” (Hartman 244). For example, Edny left his home in Europe to start a new life in America; therefore, he dissociated himself from his homeland and family, which is connected to the departure of the American colonies from the British nation. Since Edny is a recent European immigrant in the novel, he can be read as the symbol used for America, even more so since he parted from his parent country as a savage and only became more of one after arriving at the states. This exemplifies the way the American people strayed from the path of an American asylum and made it more of an American prison. To continue, Edny’s mental state only separates further from actuality after arriving on the continent. He digs holes and buries manuscripts from his mistress, whom he believes to be dead, while sleepwalking, thus, making these acts a physical manifestation of his conscious while he is asleep and unable to control the forces that drive him to act out emotions and memories. This means that when Edny ventures through the woods naked and crying, he is acting out emotions that he has detached himself from when awake, like his guilt and shame for being a murderer. That changes when Huntly has Edny bring forth the memories to tell his story and, by doing so, he destroys the dissociation between Clithero Edny’s conscious thought and unconscious, continuous pain, driving him to plunge himself into the woods to seek mental alleviation through

physical pain. This is a connection to the travelers that visited America and see for themselves the broken quality of a falsely advertised free nation.

Those on the outside believed in the picturesque American dream until they experienced it for themselves. While J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur describes the American as a man who “works for himself” (429) in the “great American asylum” in letter three titled “What Is an American,” his views are vastly different by letter nine. In his ninth letter on Charlestown and slavery called “Description of Charles Town; Thoughts on Slavery; on Physical Evil; a Melancholy Scene,” he expresses his anguish for the enslaved people, saying “Oh, Nature, where art thou? Are not these blacks thy children as well as we...nothing is to be seen but the most diffusive misery and wretchedness” (Crèvecoeur 434). By saying this, Crèvecoeur calls attention to the vast difference between what America is believed to be and what it actually is. There is a dissociative quality in the core make-up of America that is outlined by his letters being that they begin with the presented version of an America for the working man and end with the true vision of America overtaken by greed. He calls the American people to attention, saying,

While all is joy, festivity, and happiness in Charles-Town, would you imagine that scenes of misery overspread in the country? Their ears by habit are become deaf, their hearts are hardened; they neither see, hear, nor feel for the woes of their poor slaves, from whose painful labours all their wealth proceeds. Here the horrors of slavery, the hardship of incessant toils, are unseen... (Crèvecoeur 434)

In those lines alone, he describes the disjointedness in the morality of the country. His words exemplify both the broken psyche of American people and the broken state of the American country, thus, linking the two. That being said, these lines relate to Brown’s novel because he writes the character Sarsefield as a visitor in the country reluctant to help Clithero Edny, who is

used as the American representation. He tries to stay far away from Edny when he realizes what he is, but Edny does not understand that he is perceived as a barbarian, just like the United States of America and the people who live there do not believe they are cruel, so this is used to compare the way Clithero Edny's self-perception and actual being is separated just as the perception of self on part of Americans and their harsh actions are separated. This is further described by Crèvecoeur when he says,

The cracks of the whip urging these miserable beings to excessive labour, are far too distant from the gay Capital to be heard. The chosen race eat, drink, and live happy, while the unfortunate one grubs up the ground, raises indigo, or husks the rice; exposed to a sun full as scorching as their native one; without the support of good food, without the cordials of any cheering liquor. This great contrast has often afforded me subjects of the most conflicting meditation. On the one side, behold a people enjoying all that life affords most bewitching and pleasurable, without labour, without fatigue, hardly subjected to the trouble of wishing.

(Crèvecoeur 434)

Taking that, the fact that Brown describes somnambulism as "common" links the notion of sleepwalking people to a sleepwalking nation. The dissociation then happens between what is expected and what is received from American society. The nation was advertised as the home of the free, yet those who visited could see the depth at which the country was broken; they could see the hypocrisy through slavery and the progress that was not made but destroyed. Similarity, like slavery, the defilement of a woman and her character in America is evident through the study of a break in the mental awareness of men in the 1700s.

Like the narrow mindfulness of the sleepwalking men in the novel, the men ruling America were limited to practiced habits and self-beliefs as well, deepening the cracks in the foundation begot for the new world. The dissociation between men and women in America is evident through both Brown's novel and the literature of the eighteenth century. "Sleep-walking is thus symptomatic for Brown's character[s], but it is also the novel's way of theorizing the subjectivity of the post-revolutionary, post-Enlightenment citizen of democracy," (Downes 7) meaning that sleepwalking was the way Brown described the partiality of Americans. In Brown's novel, the belittlement of women is a reoccurring theme that is somewhat pushed to the background but vital in its existence there. This debasement of women typifies the male views of their roles in American society alongside the equally demeaning infractions upon women by the nation itself being that the narrative suggests women belong in the background, describing them as the cause of things as opposed to the doer of them. Namely, Mrs. Lorimer and Clarice do not compose great parts of the novel but aide the men who do, further typifying the separation of man and woman. This is played out in American society by the women that urge their husbands in directions that help women, like how Abigail Adams prompted her husband to keep women in mind and to not put so much power in the hands of the man, but do not get any credit even for trying. Furthermore, the European-American men went as far as viewing women as items of property and means of prosperity as opposed to partners. For example, in Brown's novel, he describes Mrs. Lorimer as "governed, in every action of her life by the precepts of duty" (Brown 36). He even goes so far as to say that her "wealth was [the] the only recommendation in the eyes of her husband" (36). The social structures that he forces women to fit into are outrageous. He removes the wants of women and replaces them with simple necessities, saying that only after the husband dies are the women "freed...from many distressful and humiliating obligations

(37)". The fact that Brown writes women in this light suggests that he was also a contributor to the dissociation of the American societal construction. Another example of the defilement of women in America is *The Scarlet Letter*.

Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote of the hypocrisy within the church in his book through the exclusion of a woman, Hester Prynne, from society. Within the narrative, a clergyman has an affair with a married woman and then leaves her to bear all of the blame upon herself and; therefore, there is a dissociation between gender expectations in America. As a result, women's works and their accomplishments are rarely acknowledged, thus creating a dissociation between the perception of women in the early years of American society and their actual contribution to the growth of it. For example, works written by women like Anne Bradstreet and Phyllis Wheatly are taught in schools because their works were actually published but what they wrote is only a small portion of the mindset of women from that time. That being said, the separation within the American social scene is furthered through the exclusion of greatness from mainstream literature by marginalizing everyone who was not a prominent, Caucasian male. Still, the dissociation between awareness and action is echoed in Brown's characterization of Huntly and his sleepwalking adventure.

Brown utilizes Edgar Huntly for many things other than just narration, one motive being to represent the dissociative behaviors that link the American psyche to the American culture. Brown writes that Huntly is not "governed by the soul which usually regulates [his] conduct (186)" while sleepwalking; henceforth, a reader can use this as a guide to outlining an indistinction on Huntly's part of who, or what, he is. With this, while Edny's separation is from birthplace, Huntly's dissociative behavior is between the fear of savages and the fear of becoming a savage since those who bore him were murdered by Native Americans when Huntly

was a child. By including this in his narrative, Brown is suggesting that the concept of ‘savage’ on the part of European-American people is misguided. For example, the ill-informed fear of European-Americans becoming savages through contact with the wilderness of the Americas is addressed when Huntly himself transforms into a savage after sleepwalking into the thicket of the forest.

In this case, Huntly reenacts the role of the supposedly murderous Indians. On the second night of his adventures, Huntly mistakes a party of friends searching for him for Indians, but they on their part mistake Huntly for an Indian and fire at him. Huntly appropriates the Indians' weapons and employs their methods to kill them. He has fulfilled the worst expectations of many European settlers that whites who come in contact with the wilderness will become savage and wild.¹³ He has, from this point of view, regressed to the stage of savagery. (Voloshin 273)

As a result, the dissociation within the perception of self can be applied to the dissociation between American society and foreign expectations. This regression on the part of Huntly is reflected by the nation in that there were fears of becoming a savage even though the American people were already savages. To illustrate, in eighteenth-century, post-revolutionary America, even with the debasement of women, a defiled race was holding the country on its back; that is, slavery had already been around for over one hundred and fifty years when the colonies broke with Great Britain. Considering this, the cruelty of Americans began long before they adopted the name “American”.

The early American nation is one commonly sought to be sugar-coated, and for good reason. For the duration of Charles Brockden Brown’s life, 1771-1810, the nation was in the

beginning years of development, yet the land of the free was plagued by a dangerous ignorance that fueled things like slavery and the debasement of women. Similar to the deterioration of Edny's mental state after the separation of from his home country, American society did not progress after the detachment from Great Britain. In fact, the continuation of slavery after the departure is a regression, like with Huntly, on behalf of America due to its lack of growth away from common practices in Europe. With this in mind, the countrymen frequently kidnapped and shipped Africans to America on overloaded ships that would leave the people subjected to filth, disease, hunger, and even death. Once in the Americas, the imprisoned lives were bought and sold as if they were cattle; they were beaten, abused, and tossed aside when no longer useful workers. As described by Olaudah Equiano in *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano ...The African. Written by Himself*, Africans were not brutes, but victims of a cruel ignorance. He describes being brought to America after being kidnapped from his home, saying that when he and the others arrived, the European-Americans "examined [them] attentively..." and by that, the displaced men, women, and children thought "[that they] should be eaten by [those] ugly men... (Equiano 19)". Equiano then addresses the monstrous American people directly, lamenting,

I remember in the vessel in which I was brought over... there were several brothers, who, in the sale, were sold in different lots; and it was very moving on this occasion to see and hear their cries at parting. O, ye nominal Christians! might not an African ask you, learned you this from your God, who says unto you, Do unto all men as you would men should do unto you? Is it not enough that we are torn from our country and friends to toil for your luxury and lust of gain?... Why are parents to lose their children, brothers their sisters, or husbands their

wives? Surely this is a new refinement in cruelty, which, while it has no advantage to atone for it, thus aggravates distress, and adds fresh horrors even to the wretchedness of slavery. (Equiano 19)

These evils were never-ending. When remembering what slavery was constituted of, it is important to remember that it was condoned, frequently being supported by those who believed themselves most religious. That being, the hypocrisy of the American nation goes as deep as religious faith. William Bradford wrote of the sinful religious leaders in England, saying that the devil had made his way to the very center of his spiritual beliefs and that those crimes against morality were his reason for seeking freedom in America. However, those visions of a sin-free world, of a “City upon a Hill” (Winthrop 197) were not fulfilled. With that in mind, Brown takes these atrocities and writes of the hypocrisy of Americans through the eyes of a character afraid of savages, yet, becoming one.

The American nation was being run under false pretenses. For example, when the Declaration of Independence was forged, it excluded everyone who was not a white man from the rights deemed natural to the citizens of the new, free world. That thought suggests a break between the viewpoint of American men and the notion of a free country. A good example of the ignorance behind the molding of the new world is one of the country's Founding Fathers, Thomas Jefferson. He is the author of the most famous line of the Declaration of Independence: “all men are created equal”. Yet, regardless of what is written in that document *Notes of Virginia* is the complete opposite. In chapter fourteen of his autobiography titled “Laws,” Jefferson expresses his distinct belief that “negros” are inferior to Caucasians as well as Native Americans, saying, “I think one [African American] could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid; and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and

anomalous... Religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Whately; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism” (473). These statements exemplify the lack of understanding on part of those in power, which creates a dissociation between the common people of the Americas and the patriarchal, Caucasian hegemony. He continues to speak on his hopes of one day removing African Americans from the country, emphasizing that it is for the sake of not “staining the blood” of European-Americans. These irrational beliefs are at the heart of the country.

In essence, it is not a country that is broken, but the minds and the morals of the people who live there. The depraved state of government leaders in eighteenth-century America forced the country to operate in an unconscious way, comparable to sleepwalking as suggested by Brown in his novel, leaving the country to act as one without consciousness, or morality. The question of “what is an American” has been asked generations and answered in many different ways but one theme is bulbous: the American is the barbarian that he or she is afraid of. The American country is one that enslaved a race, oppressed a gender, and is continually regressing from states of improvement to those of denial. As in *Edgar Huntly; or Memoirs of a Sleepwalker*, a dissociation between the actual self and perceived self stands as a holding place for the hypocrisy displayed by a country. For Edny and Huntly, it is a break in their psyche from understanding and the denial of what they have become. In the United States of America, it is the denial of what the people have always been rather than what they are becoming; it is the dissociation between being free and believing that one is free.

CHAPTER 4

A SEARCH FOR FEMININE IDENTITY IN VICTORIAN ERA AMERICA IN *THE AWAKENING*

“Every step which she took toward relieving herself from obligations added to her strength and expansion as an individual. She began to look with her own eyes; to see and to apprehend the deeper undercurrents of life” (Chopin 91). In nineteenth-century England, women lived by strict rules that required heinous acts of beauty, obedience, and ultimately, oppression. Degradation of women during the later Victorian years is not only oppression by their masculine counterparts but also the society that women lived in. In Chopin’s novel, mother and wife, Edna Pontellier, realizes that her predetermined obligations as a woman create a prison in which her true identity is trapped. Although she tries to create a new, feminine identity as a person and not a possession, it does not work. Edna abandons her family and dives into the life of a socially unacceptable adulterer that eventually commits suicide after she fails to successfully obtain independence as a woman during the years before

women were *allowed* to be independent. That being said, in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, the subjection of women during the Victorian Age is outlined through the actions of the female characters, specifically Edna Pontellier and her search for identity.



Fig 2

Edna exemplifies women outside of the socially acceptable boundary that confined and defined them. That is, Victorian women were given standards of propriety to uphold as well as laws that bound them to inferiority. Surprisingly, many works were written about women, although not many of them were written by women. These works usually fell under the categories of both legal and oppressing. For example, like Edna, married women were the possessions of their husbands due to Louisiana law. Chopin directly addressed the absurdity of the legality behind a woman becoming a possession after marriage, saying, “You have been a very, very foolish boy, wasting your time dreaming of impossible things when you speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me free! I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If he were to say, 'Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours,' I should laugh at you both” (Chopin 105). With that, misogynistic expectations were succumbed to after marriage, like to produce children, cook, clean, and obey. Women were not even allowed to refuse sexual relations with her husband, or he would have grounds to annul their marriage. Furthermore, for women to divorce their husbands meant loss her children as well. Alongside the oblivious masculine oppressors in America come the men they earned from; that is, the European literature concerning women is extremely important to consider due to the infancy of the American nation and the influence the European influence continued to have well into the 1900s.

It is important to understand how English natives viewed women because England is the mother- country of America, therefore, greatly influencing the minds of men and the customs taught by men and women who were immigrants from there. To continue, much of the literature in Europe during the reign of Queen Victoria was written by men but there were a few important feminine voices that affected the mindfulness of the feminine identity as an individual during the

years of the feminist movement. The author Mary Wollstonecraft was an eighteenth-century woman who believed in the equality of men and women, bringing rise to the issues of oppression and the unjust, legally induced inferiority of women before the term ‘feminist’ or any movement arose. Like Chopin’s stand against the patriarchal society, Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* holds many convictions that refute predetermined ideas of women and refuse to accept conclusions found by men on the extent of a woman’s abilities. In fact, she even suggests that men were afraid to give women equal rights, lamenting that “there is little reason to fear that women will acquire too much courage or fortitude,” (Wollstonecraft 3). As when Chopin addresses Edna’s lover’s fear of taking another man’s property, Wollstonecraft responds to Jean-Jacques Rosseau, who offered his thoughts on education and basic human rights in his book *Emile*. He writes, “[a]ll education of women must be relative to men pleasing them, being useful to them raising them when they are young and caring for them when they are old, advising them, consoling them, making their lives pleasant and agreeable...” (Rosseau 470), in which Wollstonecraft responds, “Rousseau declares that a woman should never, for a moment, feel herself independent, that she should be governed by fear to exercise her *natural* cunning, and made a coquettish slave in order to render her a more alluring object of desire, a *sweeter* companion to man, whenever he chooses to relax himself” (24). Taking the contradicting thoughts between men and women on a woman’s place in the world, Chopin takes the socially prearranged expectations of women, outlines, and mocks them.

The societal standards for women during the nineteenth century were as oppressing as the laws that legally bound them to obedience, and Chopin reports them directly in her novel. She explains that the “mother-woman” is the ideal, acceptable identity for women. She says that “[t]hey were women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a

holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels,” (Chopin 23). By commenting on the destructive nature of conjectures on the individual identity of women, Chopin reveals her views of both the men who ask these things and of the women that support them in their quest for power over every womanly aspect of society. That being, the roles of women, not only in America but also in its parent country, took many years to evolve. Misogynistic expectations included the bearing of children after marriage as well as obedience and complacency. The ideal woman was pale, petite, and eager to please. She should be soft-spoken, malleable, and young. As Wollstonecraft explained in her vindication, women who acted out of character were considered masculine, and Chopin writes that women who expressed themselves as individuals were considered manly, saying, “I suppose this is what you would call unwomanly; but I have got into a habit of expressing myself. It doesn’t matter to me, and you may think me unwomanly if you like,” (Chopin 103). These descriptions provide an understanding of Edna’s social suicide by Edna herself. That being, when women did take a stand and attempt to create an identity as a woman and not accept the pre-established roles as a mother and a wife, they faced backlash from their community, like Edna gets from multiple characters, especially Adele Ratignolle since she serves as the model woman in the novel.

Adele is the epitome of “mother-woman” in Chopin’s novel; therefore, she embodies the expectations of women in 1899. By being the essence of proper, Adele creates a small sense of freedom, becoming an Uncle Tom character. She and her fellow Creole women can speak freely about socially unacceptable topics without persecution from the community simply because they do everything else so well. Chopin describes Adele as a traditional housewife. Adele is a good mother and a well-kept wife the calls attention to the behaviors of Edna deemed inappropriate. Chopin uses this character to convey that Edna is “not one of [them]...(19)”, meaning that Edna

is not constituted of womanly qualities or virtues when she suggests that Edna is susceptible to the advances of Robert even though she is married. Elizabeth LeBlanc comments,

The world of Grand Isle and the Creole wife, embodied in Adele Ratignolle, rejects Mademoiselle Reisz, save in her limited role as a musician, for she too clearly exists outside the comfortable categories and accepted definitions of the heterosexual "norm." This rejection perhaps represents Chopin's ostensible capitulation to the forces of patriarchy, male domination, and heterosexuality. Simultaneously, however, Edna—in the shifting valences of her character and her deeply felt (but little understood) responses to her environment—provides a subtle and powerful critique of these forces. To acknowledge Edna as metaphorical lesbian (as opposed to the "actual" lesbian Mademoiselle Reisz) is to broaden the parameters of this critique, and to deepen its implications for female potential. (292)

That being, Edna's potential to become her own person is rejected by Adele because she belongs to the populace bound by the male-dominated society that requires her to feel whole as an inferior person, and she does. This rejection of Edna's search for an identity is evident when Chopin writes Adele begging her to consider her children and return to her life as a subservient wife. Furthermore, the treatment of women like Edna after they break away from the expected is brutal.

The conduct with which women who strayed from societal expectations were submitted to included immense amounts of criticism and exclusion. In Chopin's novel, Edna is not

accepted by her community as a woman free to make her own decisions; therefore, when she begins to form an identity of her own, she receives ridicule from society. For example, Chopin writes of the rejection even from Mademoiselle Reiz when Edna says she will give up her children for herself as well as with Robert Lebrun abandoning Edna when she broke away from society completely. This social exclusion of free-thinking women is found in many places, even with Kate Chopin herself. In writing *The Awakening*, Chopin went against the collective social hierarchy, and patriarchy, established by the men who sought out America for freedom. She received so much that hatred for her work that it became the downfall of her literary career. As for Edna, when she gained an identity as a woman, she gradually recognized the acts of submission she partook in without realizing it. For example, Chopin says,

She perceived that her will had blazed up, stubborn and resistant.

She could not at that moment have done other than denied and resisted. She wondered if her husband had ever spoken to her like that before, and if she had submitted to his command. Of course she had; she remembered that she had. But she could not realize why or how she should have yielded, feeling as she then did.

(Chopin 35)

Edna's abandonment of her marital and motherly duties instills a new identity, one that is underrepresented in the late nineteenth century. Furthermore, Chopin's use of sexuality in the book offers a comparison between the socially acceptable abuse of masculinity in consideration of their promiscuity with the persecution of their feminine counterparts when faced with the same sexual experimentation. Hutchison explains,

Beginning with the assumption that women of all cultures experience a conflict between their culturally prescribed gender roles and their individual sexual desires, [like] the character Edna Pontellier... The expression of female desire conflicts with prescribed cultural behavior. [The] character also moves away from her family and cultural roots, thus assuring herself a necessary distance for rebellion against social standards.

This “necessary distance” described by Chopin typifies oppression by an entire society, women included, towards women. This is displayed when Adele urges Edna to think of her children, and therefore, regress back into her prescribed role as a mother and wife. By writing of a woman exploring her sexuality and abandoning her family, Chopin is communicating the lack of identity a woman has in Victorian American society. In fact, as seen when comparing Edna and Alcee, Alcee experiences more social acceptance when considering this sexuality while Edna is shunned. Wollstonecraft offers an explanation of this in her earlier work, saying, “[One] reason why men have superior judgment, and more fortitude than women, is undoubtedly this, that they give a freer scope to the grand passions, and by more frequently going astray enlarge their minds,” (Wollstonecraft 142). To clarify, Alcee has more freedom to express himself intellectually as well as sexually and since he is a man, he has the ability to do so without the consequences given to his latest partner, Edna, simply because she is a woman. Furthermore, the rebellion of Edna against her patriarchal society signifies the rebellion of Chopin against hers. She not only directly references the feminist movement in writing of the “circle of pseudo-intellectual women--super-spiritual superior beings,” but also gave her career as a writer up by publishing this as her credibility was demolished and her character attacked. Chopin experienced

so much negative criticism and disapproval that the work was her last and due to health issues, she died just five years after publication. That being said, Chopin herself experienced the oppression of women as a consequence of identity. Her novel outlined it, but the response to the novel provided any missing evidence.

Throughout the duration of history, women have faced oppression from many places, and even though it was written before its time, Chopin's novel serves as one of the first novels of acknowledgment by women of their mistreatment by society. Chopin's use of the socially unacceptable qualities of a woman offer her audience an insight into the struggle through oppression for those labeled fair and fragile, wife and mother. Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* serves as the lingering evidence of the search for feminine identity at the end of the nineteenth century by writing of women that are included and excluded for conformality or independence away from the socially preestablished standards of women as well as the struggle of a woman, in this case Edna Pontellier, searching for herself among the oppression, and ultimately rejection, from her fellow characters.

CHAPTER 5

THE RAPING OF EQUALITY AMONG AMERICANS IN RICHARD WRIGHT'S *NATIVE SON*

Fig 3

“Rape was not what one did to women. Rape was what one felt when one’s back was against a wall and one had to strike out (Wright 227).” This demeaning definition comes from Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. Not only does this malicious redefining of a vicious crime attempt to weaken the ramifications of a rape as well as undermine all of the attacks before the book was written, but it also lingers into the day as a way to take away from, or even reject, each account of rape following the book’s publishing. Rape is “unlawful sexual activity and usually, sexual intercourse

carried out forcibly or under threat of injury against a person's will or with a person who is beneath a certain age or incapable of valid consent because of mental illness, mental deficiency, intoxication, unconsciousness, or deception”, as defined by Merriam-Webster. It will not be belittled or redefined by anyone. There are literal and figurative rapes in the novel, beginning with the physical and figurative attack of women as well as the black male psyche.

Bigger is the main character, however, just because he is erratic and consuming, the reader should not overlook the brutality with which Wright details his female roles. Women are raped in Wright’s novel, both physically and emblematically, although, the novel is not always read in a way that shines a light on the defamation of the female character. “When the text is read as one would read the black and white negative of a photograph, what immediately becomes

apparent is a second dialectical struggle underlying the authorized one: the struggle to appropriate (and thus dehumanize) women by reducing them to objects of male status conflict, to what Hélène Cixous calls 'The Realm of the Proper,' which 'functions by the appropriation articulated, set into play, by man's classic fear of seeing himself expropriated' (France 112)". Though literal rape of women is evident, it is the figurative rape of the female character along with the lack of depth that Wright gives his female personas that is the added dimension to the novel. First, there is a symbolic defilement of a woman in the first six pages when Bigger kills the rat.

Vera is the least developed and most cliché female character in the entire book. While Bigger is searching for himself, he gets a job, has a girlfriend, and serves as a weighted part of the family because he is the provider, but Vera has nothing more than her sewing classes and her whining to define her. Sylvia H. Keady writes that,

...the ascribed attributes of blacks and women reveal that common opinions associates the same traits with both: inferior intelligence, an instinctual or sensual gratification, an emotional nature both primitive and childlike, an imagined prowess in or affinity for sexuality, a contentment with their own lot which is in accord with a proof of its appropriateness, a wily habit of deceit, and concealment of feeling. Both groups are forced to the same accommodational tactics: an ingratiating or supplicatory manner invented to please, a tendency to study those points at which the dominant group is subject to influence or corruption, and an assumed air of helplessness involving fraudulent appeals for direction through a show of ignorance. (Keady 124)

Vera has almost all of these characteristics and because she is a woman and black, those attributes are shoved into her character two-fold. She cries for no reason and bickers with her siblings; she attends sewing school as if that will lead her anywhere in life; she faints at the sight of a rat. Vera's character is the first to suggest a demeaning and, thus, raping of the female character through stereotypical characteristics and actions. Mary Dalton is also a cliché female persona.

To characterize a white woman in the 1900s as rebellious to a hypocritical father, or raped by a crazy black man, is like describing an apple as shiny. The depth of the character hardly passes face deep, however, Mary's character is the most developed female character in the book. Although she is killed off in the first part, Mary is still the main woman of the entire story, that is, she is the woman through which the male story advances. Though there was no physical rape, Wright made it a point to ensure that the reader knew how important a raped white girl was to the white community. Mary's murder is used as nothing more than a place holder for Bigger's charges of rape and murder. It was the reason needed by white men to prosecute a black man, thus, is an example of how Wright appropriates women to further the story of Bigger. For example, Wright states, "To hint that he had committed a sex crime was to pronounce the death sentence; it meant a wiping out of his life even before he was captured; it meant death before death came, for the white men who read those words would at once kill him in their hearts" (Wright 243). That supports the previous statement in that the quote does not mention Mary, yet speaks of how the white men felt about what may or may not have happened to her and how it would affect Bigger. It is not so much that the people in the book believe that Mary was raped, it is more than Wright is intent on having Bigger labeled a rapist. The rape of Mary Dalton was a thought that held Bigger "against the wall (227)," as Wright would say, and assaulted him instead.

Although Wright makes a fuss over the white woman's rape, it is only in passing does the reader learn of and then forgets Bessie's assault.

Because Bessie is a woman, her rape has no more meaning than her life does in the novel. Because Bessie is a *black* woman, her rape and murder are used as evidence in a white woman's trial instead of being examined for her own justice to be received. Wright's deliberate oppression of Bessie is the most important anti-feminist and racial notion in the entire novel. Bessie's character is a drunk who is used for sex and then forced into a criminal act she does not wish to partake in (Wright 175). Her character plays along with Wright's dehumanization of women, using Bessie as a puppet to advance Bigger's story. Bessie is a pawn, not a person. Her rape is mentioned no more than two times because the assault of a black woman is not something one stresses over when one is a man. No one cared that Bessie was displayed in a courtroom. No man thought she should be buried or with family, while in comparison to Mary's story, men screamed that Bigger be lynched (Wright 270). These scenes exemplify how the presence of women in the novel is essentially raped to create more attention around the crime of a man. Although a majority of Wright's story is written around the appropriation of women, there is an ever-present raping of the black male psyche.

Bigger exists on this suspended plane of disbelief. Wright portrays him as this confused, yet all-knowing young black man living in a white man's world. Bigger's thoughts are erratic and irrational but every thought has an explanation that could almost be logical, if not for morals or common sense. Because of the insight readers have into the mind of a black man, they can come to the conclusion that Bigger is a rape victim, if not by physical brutality then by mental abuse—in a sense that he is the product of his heritage. Due to his upbringing, his mind becomes a rape victim as he has been violated and injured against his will. The black male psyche,

especially in this time period, *Bigger Thomas* showcases a weak and volatile place because of the lingering trauma of being imprisoned in a “free” world. “The belief that emancipation damaged black mental health has a time-honored quality. Some forty years after Emancipation, in an exploration of the nature of schizophrenia among African Americans, Arrah B. Evarts, a government physician, never doubted what had become professional lore. “‘It has been said by many observers whose words can scarce be doubted, that a crazy negro was a rare sight before emancipation. However, that may be, we know this is by no means rare today.’ This linkage of emancipation with the increased incidence of black insanity continued into the interwar period (Scott 13).” Men were stuck between thinking like a slave and living like a slave, in that they still worked for white men for nothing more than enough to pay the oppressor for a roof to live under. Even Bernard W. Bell said that “Wright’s portrayal of *Bigger* resurrects the white American myth of the depraved, emancipated Southerner (Bell 159).” Readers can grasp the intensity with which a person could drift into various mental health problems and even grow to resent something they cannot fully understand since black men usually had to drop out of school to support their families. The rape aspect here is not that *Bigger* was sexually assaulted, it is that he was a young black man who had no opportunity to grow beyond his rights in society that was nearly nonexistent. White America raped the minds of slaves and that trauma traveled for decades through the generations of oppressed African Americans throughout history, especially affecting the male psyche because when one cannot overcome the amount of melanin in his skin, he cannot overcome anything else.

With that, one does not need to know much about Richard Wright to understand his view of rape, much less his view of women and the black man’s mind. By simply skimming though *Native Son*, a reader can picture a Wright’s belief system; that is, while his writing of women is

demeaning, but also helps a reader to shape, what he believes to be, the characteristics of a woman and what it means to be of the fairer sex in his eyes as well as help the reader grasp the depth of damage to the mental health of African Americans in the decades after Emancipation. Thus, the vagueness with which Wright portrays the female characters and the depth with which he writes Bigger's character supports the notion that women were only used as a tool to illuminate a delusional black man. The lack of depth to the women in this novel is the rape of an entire sex. The entire book exemplifies the rape of a race.

CHAPTER 6

A FINALE THOUGHT ON CREATIVE AUTHORS AND THEIR MOTIVATIONS

As seen, there are many authors with many opinions of people, be it about their class, their gender, their color, or their ethnicity. The oppression experienced that gave rise to these novels is not one that was born overnight but has persisted since the beginning of time. The European authors that paved the oppression of women in their novel made room for the uprise of the woman later in literature and history. Women like Kate Chopin were banned from schools because their works held too much information on the freedom and individuality of right in a male-dominated America, Charles Brockden Brown discovered an inability to cope in a new world in which one sought to become more but found themselves as less than before, and Richard Wright completely defaced not only an African American man but also an entire gender of women, regardless of their race. That being said, works of literature do not carry a lot of weight in the world when deemed appropriate by society; however, it is those that go against the common thought, those that debunk the praised works of literal oppression, that make the difference in a societal way of thinking. The authors that chose to be controversial are those that offer the greatest amount of growth to the reader. They are the ones who promote the knowledge of past oppression and call for an end to the nonsense in the future.

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